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What Does the American Heritage Mean?

A radio discussion over WGN and the Mutual Broadcasting System
in cooperation with the American Library Association
on the occasion of its 75th Anniversary

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What Does the American Heritage Mean?

MR. MCBURNEY: I think I should say here at the opening, gentlemen, that the American Library Association, with which some of you are associated, is now holding its 75th Anniversary Conference here in Chicago. The theme of this Conference is the subject of this program, "The American Heritage in Time of Crisis." The Library Association has just announced a grant of \$150,000 from the Ford Foundation to help support its nationwide study of the American Heritage—"a program to stimulate general thinking on our freedoms by understanding their origin and their application to the great problems of today."

What is this American Heritage, Wilson?

The Founding Fathers

MR. WILSON: McBurney, looking at 5000 years of human history, I am very much impressed with the fact that at the time of our Constitution and of the Declaration of Independence, for the first time, an organized group of little men announced themselves for little men. The Founding Fathers were little men, doctor, lawyer, merchant, chief, you can run them down in that order: Benjamin Rush, doctor; John Adams, a lawyer; John Hancock, a merchant; and you might call Samuel Adams a chief since he participated in the Boston Tea Party. At any rate, they said that little men banded together in common consent were the power of government. They said another interesting thing and that is that this power was not to be permitted to push other little men around. Particularly in the Bill of Rights they safeguarded the rights of individuals and the minority, so that down to the individual citizen in his

home, the person of the little man was sacred and important.

MR. MCBURNEY: How would you describe the American Heritage, Decker?

MR. DECKER: I would say it was not only a government of little men, because the little men also were very great men. Wilson here knows a lot more about history than most of us at the round table. He has been discussing and studying history in terms of five, six, seven and eight thousand years. I wonder if he would agree that the American Heritage, more popularly known as American democracy, is probably the greatest experiment on a mass basis in known history in self-government.

MR. WILSON: I would.

'By Consent'

MR. DECKER: It has not, of course, always achieved its highest ideals; it has often fallen short of its goals, but I think it is fair to say that from its earliest beginnings, it has been government by consent rather than descent; its approach to its problems has been pragmatic rather than dogmatic; and the solution of its problems has been through compromise rather than by divine, inherited, or self-appointed authority. Not all of the pre-Revolutionary colonists believed in democracy; indeed, in 1691, the conservative Massachusetts Bay Colony was violently opposed to it, but John Wise, a preacher from Ipswich, enunciated the American Heritage as it was to prevail when he exhorted the Bay Colonists: "It needs must be a democracy. . . . This is the form of government which the light of nature does highly value. . . . Also the natural equality of man amongst men must

be duly favored. . . . The end of all good government is to cultivate humanity, and promote the happiness of all, and the good of every man in his rights, his life, liberty, estate, honor . . . without injury or abuse to any." Sentiments like these were to be embodied a hundred years later in the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the Bill of Rights.

MR. MCBURNEY: How would you put it, Ellsworth?

MR. ELLSWORTH: I would put it in very general terms and say something like this: The American Heritage is whatever the citizen has that is not of his own effort and his own making, the thing that he has acquired and been brought into the world to enjoy. To the American, I think this heritage shows up as principles and opportunities and obligations. For example, principles of governmental organization and group action based on respect for the integrity of the human individual; and secondly, opportunities for building his own life based on the idea that the amount of effort he exerts will be the thing that will make a difference. There are no barriers except effort and ability and individual initiative; and there are obligations also, based on the assumption that the individual knows that his destiny depends on his participation. He knows that is true. If he fails in his job and does not live up to his obligations, then the whole structure collapses.

Explicit?

MR. MCBURNEY: Are these principles you men are enunciating here *explicit*, Decker, in the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the Bill of Rights, as I think you implied?

MR. DECKER: McBurney, I would agree with Ellsworth that they are *explicit* in the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence, and the Bill of Rights. I think even more important than that, they are *implicit*. The application, of course, of these principles has evolved and expanded with the evolutionary and expanding nature of

our national life. The American Heritage was formulated in a revolutionary era, a fact that many Americans are inclined to forget, times which like our own today, tried men's souls. This revolution was economic, social, industrial, political, intellectual, and spiritual. Its philosophy was formulated by thinkers like Locke and Hume in England and the French Encyclopedists. More than a political philosophy, it was also a kind of religious faith that held at least three beliefs: a belief in the essential dignity of human life and in man's perfectibility. No one dreamed man would become perfect, but the idea he could grow towards perfectibility was an important element of this religious faith, a faith in our ability to win out if we live intelligently, a belief that man's inhumanity to man can somehow be alleviated if truth, reason and good will are allowed to prevail. There are two other beliefs: a belief in the necessity of freedom for the fullest realization of man's potentialities as a human being; and a third, a point I don't think is stressed enough today, a belief that we possess not only the right, but the obligation to protect and fight for and expand these inalienable possessions.

General Welfare of the People

MR. ELLSWORTH: That is very interesting, and if you go back to the very documents themselves, you will find some very specific statements. For example, in the Constitution itself, in the Preamble, you recall those phrases in which they said the things they were interested in, putting them down in black and white. They talked about establishing justice and they were interested in the whole country, the perfect union, and they were interested in promoting the general welfare. In other words, in spite of the individualism of that day, they understood clearly that they were doing all the things they were proposing for the *general welfare* of the people. Then you recall back in the Declaration of Independence, I think it is, some very interesting statements too

that were quite specific: if the American people don't like their government, they have the right to alter and abolish it and institute new government.

MR. DECKER: Jefferson advocated a natural revolution every twenty years. I don't like to quote that because it has too often been taken out of context. I don't think he meant quite that; rather he meant the idea of stirring things up every twenty years; re-evaluating what we are doing was the implicit whole point of view of Jefferson.

MR. WILSON: I want to say, Decker and Ellsworth, it is true that these values are implicit in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, but as 175 years have gone on, it has been found necessary to make certain implicit assumptions and values explicit. That comes in the extension of the community. Back in Greek democracy, the slaves for example were not included, and at first, our slaves were not included. It was necessary to have an amendment with regard to slaves. It was necessary to have an amendment to women's rights and put the women into the community. Those are amendments, but there has also been a growth such as the growth of an economic system which we call the capitalistic system which has Labor extremely important and extremely powerful within that system.

Reinterpretations

MR. ELLSWORTH: That is true. The interesting thing and the unique thing as we make these reinterpretations, we try desperately to make them in the light of the general charter, you might say; and that you remember was a radical one based on consent. So whenever we are working in the American tradition, we are doing these reinterpretations within a framework of those principles that were fairly clear and generous at that time.

MR. MCBURNEY: In terms of this original heritage which you have been describing and the interpretations to which Ellsworth and Wilson have just

referred, to make these a bit more specific, to what does this heritage commit us? For example, Decker, do you think it commits us to the free enterprise system in our economic life?

MR. DECKER: I hesitate to use the word "free enterprise." I believe in free enterprise, but I think the phrase is tossed around too much by labor unions and the National Association of Manufacturers, and we educators, to cover a multitude of sins. The fact is that from the very beginning there has always been more or less government control in our national life. The great debate in our domestic life revolves around the problem of how much and how little control we should have, but it was this same debate 150 years ago that divided Hamilton and Jefferson. Most Americans, and many of the so-called "New Dealers" believe that the less government, the better. We know that too little government leads to anarchy, just as too much leads to dictatorship. We have a mixed economy. We had a mixed economy in the beginning and in the future it is my hope that in this mixed economy we can promote as much "home rule" as possible. That is, we ought to have government decentralized in towns, cities, states. Good citizenship, like charity, really begins at home. I hope too, we can obtain a much greater degree of honesty and efficiency in all government units. I hope that we can continue our highly competitive economic system. I hope for an ever greater degree of social mobility in our national life and a lesser degree of distinction between groups, and finally, I hope in this mixed economy of the day and of the future, for an ever greater degree of equality of opportunity for the youth of each succeeding generation.

Free Enterprise

MR. WILSON: I would phrase it a little differently, Decker. I think that we are in a heritage which has the idea of free enterprise as something that we take for granted. Thus, any limi-

tation on free enterprise, or any change from free enterprise has to be justified over a period of time. It is a feature of our national life that what are originally left-wing proposals by some third party, often in the space of 15 or 20 years come to be embraced as proposals by some of the major parties. They are usually some kind of limitation on the easy-going system before, so that we take the easy-going system for granted, and we work out a common consent of people in order to put a new limitation on that laissez faire policy.

MR. ELLSWORTH: Yes, that was the point that interested me particularly. You take free enterprise for granted, but you graft on the new interpretation you have when it appears to promote the general welfare. Jefferson and those men would have been horrified to hear anybody say you think of free enterprise primarily in terms of the man who makes and sells things; they would have thought of it primarily in terms of the rights of the man who buys and consumes. That makes a very great difference.

MR. MCBURNEY: Decker, does this heritage commit us to anything in the field of education?

'Education Essential'

MR. DECKER: Since the earliest beginnings of our country, education has been considered essential to the strength of our way of life. The Founding Fathers were educated men and constantly in letters and diaries, in their writings, they were stressing education. In 1797 in his Farewell Address, Washington said: "Promote, then, as object of primary importance, institutions for the general diffusion of knowledge. In proportion as the structure of a government gives force to public opinion, it is essential that public opinion should be enlightened." I think that statement summarizes the whole, long tradition of American life with regard to education and our heritage.

MR. ELLSWORTH: The men you are speaking of, I believe, all had a par-

ticular kind of education, Mr. Decker. They had what we call the classical kind, the old liberal arts kind of education in which they read the statements of the philosophers and so on, and yet it is rather interesting that as those men thought of the kind of educational system that we had to have in this country, they included a broader base than that. They thought of vocational training. Jefferson thought of agricultural training. So in order to implement the idea of individual freedom and a variety of kinds of living, we developed a curricular pattern that is varied in scope, classical along with the freest kind of vocational training in our schools and colleges.

'Colleges Founded Early'

MR. DECKER: In that connection, Benjamin Franklin founded the Pratt Institute in Philadelphia and Jefferson founded the University of Virginia, and long before we had a country as the United States, we had colleges and universities: Harvard 1636, William and Mary 1751, Dartmouth and Columbia 1754. More interesting I think is the fact that as the settlers moved westward, their first act in establishing a new community was first, to establish a church, and second, to establish a school of some sort. Between 1830 and 1850, more than 80 colleges were established as the settlers moved westward. This is the greatest testimonial to the basic importance we Americans have attached from the beginning to our spiritual and intellectual life.

MR. WILSON: Decker, one of the experiences I have had is in entertaining visitors from educational institutions abroad. They are astonished at the great variety of our education. The Founding Fathers, it is true, were educated men. I think it is true there was one professional educator among them, John Witherspoon, a college president. They believed in education, but they did not believe in forcing a system of education and what we have developed in our country is free enterprise in education with local control

in great variety. The foreigner sees this as confusion and therefore weakness. We see it as strength because of the great opportunity it gives and the variety of opportunity. Isn't that true?

MR. DECKER: Yes.

MR. MCBURNEY: Do you regard the great library system of America as a part of this tradition of ours?

Public Libraries

MR. ELLSWORTH: I am sure Benjamin Franklin, as you recall, when he started the first public library in the country had that in mind. You will recall Yale University was founded as a collection of books. Andrew Carnegie came along later and gave many, many millions. I am sure he had in mind that unless there were some kind of institution to take hold at the point where the public school system ends, this system would be imperfect. I am sure we think of it as the tool that the adult has in this country to use after the formal school system stops.

MR. DECKER: As a matter of fact, the great program you are undertaking now with the Ford Foundation for adult education is an extension of what the leaders of our country have believed from the beginning. It was Jefferson who wanted to be remembered, not as President of the United States, but as the founder of the University of Virginia. The idea of education was implicit from the very beginning. It was extended by men like Andrew Carnegie. The whole field of education is vitally important if we are really to advance the American Heritage.

MR. ELLSWORTH: There is tremendous variety in our educational pattern. Radio, television and newspapers, are all part of it.

MR. MCBURNEY: Does this heritage of ours commit us to an international program of any kind, do you think?

MR. WILSON: Yes, I think it definitely does. We have a common purpose in safeguarding the life, liberty and pursuit of happiness of our people. It is

interesting that the Founding Fathers weren't interested in security. We have become interested in security because we have found that we cannot safeguard life, liberty and guarantee the pursuit of happiness without an extension of something similar to our way of life in other lands. This goes back a long way. Take the Monroe Doctrine—we think of it as being a phenomenon of the 20th century, of World War I, and so on, but we have been in specific contact with other countries for our whole national existence. It is in terms of facing outward as Americans, conscious of our heritage.

'Never Isolationist'

MR. DECKER: Don't you think we can say, Wilson, that our country really has never been isolationist, even from the very beginning? We have, in one way or another, been concerned with Europe's and Asia's problems since the founding of this nation. Our War of Independence involved France and England; our Monroe Doctrine was part of our foreign policy, but it was enforced by the British Navy; our own country forced the "open door" upon China and Japan. It is amusing to read recently that Russia has claimed that we interfered in her affairs unduly when we acquired Alaska from the Czars in the 19th century and wants us to return Alaska to them. I think there has been no major crisis in the world in modern history in which our foreign policy has not been deeply concerned. Further, I want to add that I can't believe any substantial group of Americans seriously believes that our country, with less than 7% of the population of the world, can live unto itself and survive.

MR. ELLSWORTH: I want to get in one point. Don't you shudder a little bit, McBurney, at our arrogance when we send missions all over the world to tell other parts of the world how to do things in the American way? We tell them how to run their school system and how to run their country. Does that worry you any?

MR. MCBURNEY: I think this is rele-

vant here. Mr. Wilson, on our panel, has written a book, "The Burden of Egypt"—he is an Egyptologist, you know, and on Page 78 he says, "Together with the process of coming of age in Egypt were optimism and self-confidence bordering on bumptiousness and an assurance that the Egyptian way was so good it was valid for all time." Are we falling onto that kind of "bumptiousness" here today?

'Element of Humility'

MR. WILSON: We can't possibly sell, to use those words, "our way of life" without a knowledge that this way of life has an element of humility. That element of humility is the recognition of the rights of many, the "common consent" factor.

MR. DECKER: I don't think the word is to "sell" our way of life to the world—that would include the White man's burden, colonialism, imperialism, and so on. I think we should substitute the word "share" some of the things we have. By that, we don't have to underwrite the rest of the world. We have great possibilities in the field of technical know-how, as the businessman says. We have many things other countries are willing to have, if we don't try to impose it upon them.

I might say our reputation abroad in far too many countries is that we are a Frankenstein, a technological giant for manufacturing machines and gadgets. The Mayor of Delhi, India, Mayor Singh, said to a small group of us not so long ago, "When the West is purely materialistic in conception as well as in practice, and most of the ills of the modern world are due to this materialism, we feel there is much that the West can learn from us." Part of this is his chip on the shoulder attitude, but India has thought she had a corner on the spiritual resources of the world and we had a corner on the materialistic. I think the American Heritage is far more than bath tubs and turbines and gadgets, although it includes those things; it is a lot more than Hollywood; it is a spiritual point of view toward life as embodied in the Declara-

tion of Independence, in the Bill of Rights, in our Constitution, in our great creative culture. These things we must make available, not to impose them, Mr. Wilson, on the rest of the world, but at least share them with the rest of the world. It is a matter of good manners and good taste.

'Share Not Impose'

MR. ELLSWORTH: Granted, but it is a little touchy when you go over on a mission financed by our government to advise them. It gets close to *telling* them and that is the critical point on this.

MR. MCBURNEY: Do you think the American Heritage you have been describing here is as applicable today as it was 100 or 200 years ago? Remember, we have lost our old physical frontiers. If a man loses his job today as a result of this economic system of ours, he can't go out to the West as my grandfather did and file on land. That opportunity is gone. We face new technological developments which call for a kind of high-speed efficiency and specialization, and we have acquired a new position in the world scene. What I am asking, I guess, is this: Are we trying to apply a horse-and-buggy creed to a jet-plane age?

MR. ELLSWORTH: I want to give a one-sentence answer and then I want to hear what you have to say, Wilson. Our heritage is applicable today largely because it is a point of view that we are really talking about and a method of solving human problems, and the method and point of view are perpetual in their applicability.

A Credo

MR. MCBURNEY: As your moderator, if I may be permitted to say this, Ellsworth has in my opinion put his finger on the essence of these documents, the Constitution, the Bill of Rights. They provide a credo, a point of view, a set of values, and they also provide a way of dealing with them. To me, that is the American Heritage in essence.

MR. WILSON: McBurney, I want to talk about this materialism Decker mentioned. It is perfectly true technology has made changes. It seems to have made man the slave of the machine. It seems to have built up great impersonal cities in which the individual counts for nothing, but in terms of a large number of Americans, it has freed them. A classic example is probably the Model T Ford and the farmer. More telling as an example is the housewife in the kitchen. She no longer has domestic servants, but she has free time as she did not have in the last century. Technical advances have brought these things.

'Never Fully Achieved'

MR. DECKER: We Americans have got to keep in mind for our own good and for our position in world affairs, while we have all the wonderful instruments for streamlined, modern living, while we have a large amount of personal freedom, we have the highest divorce rate in the world, the tawdriest entertainment and the largest number of stomach ulcers per capita. It is by these things we are too often judged abroad. The battle against ignorance, poverty, disease, social injustice still remains in our country. The battle to maintain our liberties and freedoms still has to be continuously won. This is the great thing to me about the American Heritage. It is a thing never fully achieved, a thing we constantly struggle toward. That is what makes it such an exciting thing.

MR. MCBURNEY: Another part of our heritage we haven't mentioned is our fields and streams, our natural resources. As we speak today a lot of these resources are going down the great rivers in Missouri and Kansas.

MR. DECKER: I am not sure I can get home to Kansas City this afternoon. Throughout the United States, we have lost from one-third to one-half of our top soil in little more than a century. Many of our raw materials are being expended, lead, zinc, copper, tin, manganese, uranium. I think it should be part of the American plan to start protecting its physical heritage, and develop and expand it in the future.

MR. MCBURNEY: What else can we do to strengthen and preserve our American Heritage?

MR. WILSON: We can try to understand what it means in our own activity, in our own lives. It is the old matter of faith and good works. We have to have a faith in what we have, and then we have to apply it in terms of the other fellow.

MR. MCBURNEY: Do you think we make the mistake sometimes of hiding behind symbols that don't have much meaning?

MR. WILSON: We do. We have to redefine . . .

ANNOUNCER: I am sorry, but our time is up.

The American Library Association assisted in the creation of the three following books. They implement the nationwide study of "The Heritage of the U.S.A. in Time of Crisis" under library leadership.

JOHNSON, GERALD W. *This American People*. New York, Harper & Brothers, (to be published in October, 1951).

COMMAGER, HENRY STEELE. *Living American Ideas*. New York, Harper & Brothers, (to be published in October, 1951).

FOSTER, GENEVIEVE. *Birthdays of Freedom*. New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, (to be published in January, 1952).



Suggested Readings

Compiled by William Huff
and M. Helen Perkins, Reference Department,
Deering Library, Northwestern University



ANSHEN, RUTH N., ed. *Freedom, Its Meaning*. New York, Harcourt, 1940.

Containing essays by such persons as Mann, Einstein and Russell, "this book is a positive estimation of freedom not only as embodied in institutions but also as moral and spiritual power . . ."

BECKER, CARL L. *Freedom and Responsibility in the American Way of Life*. New York, Knopf, 1945.

Five lectures delivered at the University of Michigan on: The American Political Tradition; Freedom of Speech and Press; Freedom of Learning and Teaching; Constitutional Government; Private Economic Enterprise.

BUTTS, R. FREEMAN. *The American Tradition in Religion and Education*. Boston, Beacon Press, 1950.

Addressed to "all citizens concerned with religious education" presenting "the historical evidence that should be taken into account when present decisions are made."

COMMAGER, HENRY S. and NEVINS, ALLEN. *The Heritage of America*. Boston, Little, Brown & Co., 1939.

A sampling of the narratives of American life which have become a part of American history and heritage.

DE HUSZAR, GEORGE B. (comp.) *Equality in America: The Issue of Minority Rights* (The Reference Shelf, Vol. 21, No. 3). New York, H. W. Wilson Co., 1949.

A compilation of articles on various forms of discrimination found in churches, education, housing, etc. and suggested remedies.

MONAGHAN, FRANK. *Heritage of Freedom*. Princeton, N. J., Princeton University Press, 1948.

A presentation and explanation of "the history and significance of the basic documents of American liberty" which were on the Freedom Train.

American Mercury 72:393-7, Ap., '51. "Escape from Maturity." J. H. CRIDER.

Democracy and the heritage of freedom demands mature citizenship if it is to survive and also requires that the people be intelligently active in public affairs.

Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science 275:1-161, My., '51. "Civil Rights in America." R. K. CARR, ed.

A series of articles by various authors covering aspects of civil rights in America.

The American Scholar 20:137-49, Spring, '51. "Security and Liberty." L. SEARS.

America's strength rests in the liberty of the individual; to destroy this liberty for the sake of "security" is to destroy the inalienable rights of man.

Atlantic Monthly 188:50-4, Jl., '51. "Suppression of News." J. S. POPE.

Reasons given for suppression of public information should be considered with "a robust skepticism."

English Journal 40:149-53, March, '51. "The Meaning of Democracy in America Today." J. DE BOER.

An address before the National Council of Teachers of English emphasizing the value of our American traditions as guides in our present world crisis and the duties of the teaching profession.

Lawyers Guild Review 11:1-17, Winter, '51. "An Essay on Freedom of Political Expression Today." T. J. EMERSON.

"Discussion of the provisions of the Smith Act and the McCarran Act and their effect on political freedom of speech."

Newsweek 37:50-1, Ap. 30, '51. "What Is a Free Press and What Are Its Perils?"

Ten journalists answer these questions asked by *Newsweek*: What is the chief responsibility of a free press and what are the threats to a free press in this country?

Parents' Magazine 17:17+, Ja., '42. "Cultivating the Four Freedoms." F. KINGDON.

Parents must realize that the home is the basic source of the child's education, and that this is where he learns the meaning of the Four Freedoms.

Religion in Life 19:555-66, Autumn, '50. "Individual Freedom and Economic Planning." H. SEIFERT.

Individual freedom can be expanded through the wise use of economic planning.

The Social Studies 42:104-10, March, '51. "Tolerance—Its Function in a Democratic Society." A. C. KELLER.

Tolerance must be regarded as an active stimulation rather than as a passive acceptance of minority groups.

Vital Speeches 9:710-13, Sept. 15, '43. "What Does Freedom Mean? The American Conception." N. M. BUTLER.

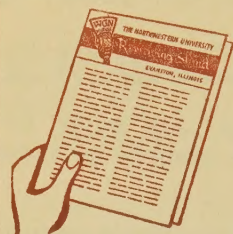
Our Four Freedoms rest upon a fifth freedom—a freedom of individual enterprise which will permit freedom for the individual to make the most of any opportunity he may have economically, socially and politically.

Vital Speeches 17:375-7, Ap., '51. "Freedom and Authority." J. KORBEL.

A consideration of where freedom ends and authority begins, particularly in a form of government whose heritage is freedom for the individual.

Vital Speeches 7:349-51, March 15, '51. "Education as of the Guardian of the American Heritage." F. J. SHEEN.

The purpose of education is not only to train for a democracy but also to train the whole man, body and soul.



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